

Putting theory to work in
research: methods for reading
and writing

Dr Helen Colley

University of Manchester, UK

The 'literature review' risks looking like this:

Chen (2010) states that... According to
Shaikh (2012)... Jones and Weinberg
(2008) found that... Basič & Houseman
(2013) state that... Speedwell et al.
(2009) found that... According to Miah &
Naveed (2012)...

The 'literature review' risks becoming:

...all about describing empirical 'facts'
and findings
...like an annotated bibliography
...rather than critically analysing **ideas**

How the 'shopping list' makes your examiner (or any other reader) feel...

- They are hopelessly **bored**
- They are deeply **frustrated** – lots of 'facts', no ideas
- They are not sure if you have **fully understood** the literature you have reviewed
- They have no idea how you see these different authors **in relation** to each other
- They have no idea what **you** think about these authors
- They have no idea **how** you think about the issues
- **They have no idea what you think at all**

Reading for theory:

- STOP READING FOR "FINDINGS" ALONE!
- Multiple readings of the same article are necessary – not just for understanding, but to pay attention to different aspects of the paper
- The findings do not stand alone! They are generated by the combination of theory and data analysis and interpretation.
- Read for **theory**
- Read how the **theory influences** the treatment of the data and its interpretation

Reading for theory

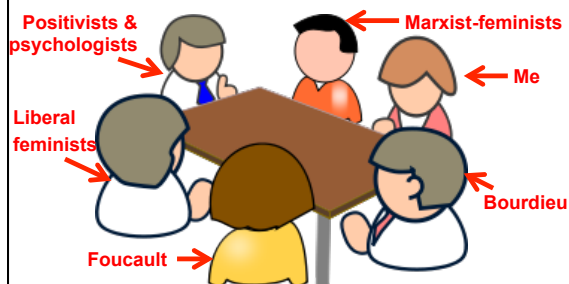
In social science research...

- **every** empirical finding is shaped by the **theories** through which the researcher **conceptualises** the social science problem they are researching
- you need to **categorise** different works according to their theoretical approach

Unpicking core concepts
Example: the power dynamics of mentoring

- Positivist psychology – power assumed to be ‘handed’ from mentor to mentee (zero sum)
- Liberal feminists – assumes ‘women’s ways’ of mentoring are better – power can be equalised between individuals
- Foucault – poststructuralist view – helpful on discipline, but does not account for ‘top-down’ power or for resistance
- Bourdieu – offers a better account of structure and agency – but can’t explain capitalist exploitation
- Marxist-feminism – focus on exploitation of women’s and young people’s labour power

My theoretical conversation with other key authors



Reading for theory means reading differently

In **reading** the literature, from Day One we need to look for the **conceptualisations** that other authors are bringing to their work, and how those conceptualisations shape their view of the topic and their findings.

This is not always obvious!

Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT)

- Developmental work research
- Change laboratories
- Knotworking
- Organisational/multi-agency learning
- Expansive learning in the workplace
- [Situated learning – Lave & Wenger]
- [Communities of practice – Wenger]
- [Learning organization – Senge]

Principles of CHAT:

Claims to be based on Marxism

1. Activity system as 'germ cell' / unit of analysis
2. Multi-voiced nature of activity
3. Historicity of activity
4. Contradictions as driving force of change in activity
5. Expansive cycles as a possible form of transformation in activity

**Engeström (2001)
Expansive Learning at Work**

An initial critique: read between the lines!

E.g.:

- What is the main driver of change identified here?
- What is the other driver of change, and how is it presented?
- To what extent are multiple voices heard?
- How deep are the contradictions identified?
- How does the article apply the notion of 'historicity'?
- What are the activities described, and who does them? Is anything missing here? (Especially 'everyday' activities?)
- What evidence is there of the expansive learning claimed for all parties?
- Might there be any problems with the 'care package' developed through the 'expansive learning cycle' in this case? Are these acknowledged?

Critiques of CHAT

1. CHAT misunderstands and de-historicises Marx's concept of activity (labour)

- Starts from 'activity' as 'germ cell' of analysis, whereas Marx starts from the commodity
- There is no historical analysis of the *mode of production* in which activity takes place, i.e. capitalism
- Divorces activity from commodity production, therefore *obscures* capitalist relations of production
- Ignores the fact that activity systems – the labour process – are used under capitalism to produce surplus value...
- ...and that *labour-power itself* becomes its most vital commodity

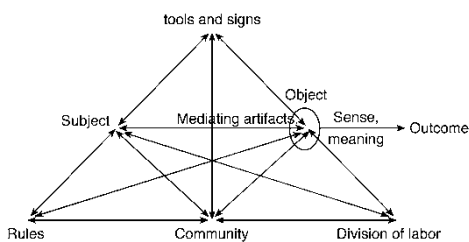
Critiques of CHAT

2. CHAT mistakes the fundamental contradiction of capitalism

- Although claiming to start analysis from *activity*, CHAT argues the most fundamental contradiction in capitalism lies in *commodities*...
- ...and the contradiction between use-value and exchange-value
- But these are peripheral contradictions which ignore the fundamental *antagonism* between capital and labour
- It argues that formation of the 'collective worker', socializing the *forces of production*, is the key to expansive learning and improved goods/services
- This implies that workers themselves become the 'object' or 'raw material' that needs working on
- It ignores the fact that workers are exploited under capitalism, which constantly seeks to increase their productivity
- CHAT therefore feeds into managerialism

Critiques of CHAT

3. A problem with triangles!



Critiques of CHAT

3. A problem with triangles!

- The elements of CHAT's activity system are fragmented...
- ...and reified as *separate*:
- The *division of labour* is itself a *tool* in the labour process
- The *subject* and *community* are homogenized as *object/raw material*
- The category of *rules* ignores the laws of *commodity production*
- Concepts of *labour-power* and *surplus value* are absent
- Class, gender and race become invisible in the *division of labour*

Critiques of CHAT

4. A conservative rather than a radical method

- *Outcomes* (processes of change) are not necessarily socially radical transformations...
- ...but can merely be conservative *transformism* (Gramsci)
- Promises new and better knowledge and forms of worker identity, and more efficient/effective products or services
- ...but increases exploitation and alienation in the name of more democratic and empowering work practices
- And initially promising outcomes can easily be subverted (e.g. LCP, CFA etc)

Critiques of CHAT

5. What else is missing?

- Where is the family and the work within it?
- Where is the process of *social reproduction*?
- Where is the work of (overwhelmingly) women in the social reproduction of *labour-power*?
- Can CHAT be applied to this activity?
- Why does CHAT focus only on the workplace, even when referring to 'everyday life'?

CHAT response to critiques

- Acknowledges critique of conservatism in CHAT
 - Emphasises Marxist roots of CHAT
 - Still starts from activity/labour vs commodity
 - Still works with the fragmented 'triangle' categories
 - Acknowledges class differences between workers and employers under capitalism
- BUT
- Focuses on employment
 - Vague references to 'everyday life'
 - Comments on women's work in the home are brief asides
- (See Sawchuk, 2006)

Reading for theory:

- What theory does the author claim to espouse?
- How do they explain their chosen theory?
- How accurate is their account of this theory? (You need to go back to the original, and some expert commentaries.)
- How do they justify their choice?
- How do they discuss competing theories? How accurately do they represent other theories?
- How convincing is their argument?
- Do they in fact apply their chosen theory? Or does the data analysis and interpretation suggest otherwise?

Reading for theory:

- How do they apply theory to the data?
- What are the consequences of this application?
- How appropriate is their theoretical analysis and interpretation?
- What problems do they acknowledge?
- What gets left out?
- Does the author confirm theory? Develop it? Advance it? How?
- Do you agree or disagree with their theoretical approach? Why?
- Do you think an alternative theory would be better? Which one(s)? Why?

Writing theory:

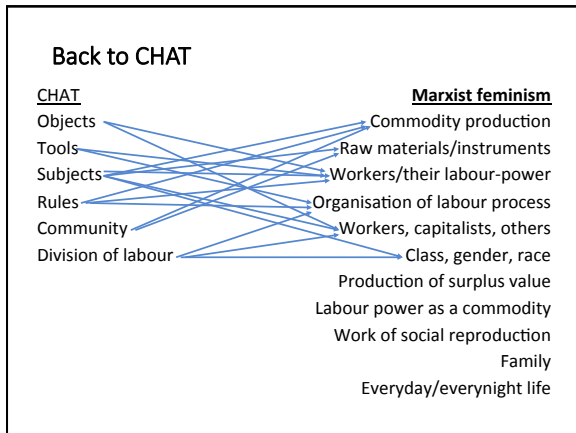
... a discussion with established academics **themselves** about their ideas **and your own**
...in which you are laying claim to your place **as one of their peers**

Writing theory as a dinner party you are hosting

- You are the **host**
- You are the **active** organiser of the conversation
- You are an **active** participant in the conversation
- You are interested in your guests' **conceptual ideas**
- You want to orchestrate a lively **debate** about these ideas
- You are **not** just passively listening to others
- You are **not** interested only in their empirical findings
- You want to locate **your** position in relation to this debate

Writing theory as a dinner party you are hosting

- Who are you going to **invite** to the conversation?
- Who are you **not** going to invite?
- What debates **about ideas** do you want to engage in?
- Who are you going to position **closest** to you?
- Who are you going to position **furthest** away from you?
- How are you going to **add** to the debates and take them forwards?
- What have **you** got to say that is **new and interesting**?



Writing theory

- Writing with authority does not mean ‘slating’ other authors
- Ensure you represent others’ work **accurately**
- **Acknowledge** the contribution others have made
- Focus on the **debates** with other perspectives
- Think of working with literatures as **drawing a map** of the topic’s conceptual ‘landscape’ for your reader
- It’s **your** job to draw **your** map for the reader
- Too much detail is not helpful – key landmarks and contours are very helpful

Writing theory

Softening your language gives it authority, e.g.:

“One school of thought is that *a...* (Segal, 2009). Importantly, this has helped to reveal *b...* This is, however, open to criticism, since it does not address the problem of *c...* (Sing, 2011). An alternative view, therefore is that *d...* (Sing, 2011; Saeed, 2012). This is the perspective that underpins this study, because it allows...”

Working with theory

- You need to read for theory
- You need to analyse other authors' stance and application of theory critically:
 - It's not always obvious
 - They don't always do what they say they are doing
 - Theory impacts on the findings
- Build your argument accurately from original sources
- Engage with conceptual debates and position yourself
- Test theories out against your data
- Our choice of theory reflects our worldview and values

Helen Colley
helen.colley@manchester.ac.uk
